

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY
 LETTER TO THE EDITOR, WASHINGTON POST, REGARDING CRITICISM IN EDITORIAL
 ABOUT HIS STATEMENTS ON U.S. OBJECTIVES IN BOSNIA
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U.S. Objectives Are Not Secret

It's surprising that The Post's editorial "A Tip to Bosnia's Besiegers" [March 13] should take me to task for being explicit about our objectives in Bosnia and the conditions that govern our use of military force. If that is the charge, I am happy to plead guilty.

The inherent danger in limited military actions is "mission creep," the gradual extension of interests and goals once a military commitment is made. As The Post opined in an editorial on Oct. 6 ["Getting on the Somali Case"], being clear about our objectives and the means we will use to secure them is the best guard against mission creep. It is also what we owe the American people and Congress when we employ this country's armed forces to achieve limited political objectives.

The United States and its allies have important but limited goals in Bosnia, and our use of military power will therefore also be limited, but effective. Sometimes we can use force, or the threat of

force, to great effect. The threat to use air power to stop the siege of Sarajevo has to date effectively ended the artillery bombardment of the city. NATO's shoot-down of the four jet fighters violating the no-fly zone the week before last was a powerful reminder of our determination to stop aerial bombardment of Bosnian cities.

It does not reveal any military secret to observe that air power would not be so useful where the principal military activity involves small-arms close combat in and around urban areas. And it serves no useful purpose to threaten something that we are not able to enforce. Empty threats, explicit or implicit, weaken our credibility. Explicit threats of the use of military power that are enforceable provide real deterrent value, as was demonstrated by our success in the Sarajevo ultimatum and in enforcement of the no-fly zone.

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A Tip to Bosnia's Besiegers

ARE YOU A Serb commander wondering whether the United States and NATO, having rescued Sarajevo, will respond if you shoot up one of the other U.N.-designated safe havens in Bosnia? Rest at ease, for the new secretary of defense, William J. Perry, has just simplified your way. In a Washington speech, he has separated the cities that NATO would extend its air power to save from those it would not. The essential difference lies in whether the besiegers use artillery. If they do, and if some other criteria are met, then NATO may respond. But if the threat is from "infantry and guerrilla action in urban areas"—as it is in various pathetic places—then those areas will be considered outside the reach of NATO air, and the besiegers may safely fire away.

It is true that air power works in some situations but may only increase civilian casualties, to no good compensating military effect, in others. There is political lunacy, however, in publicly spelling it all out at this moment in the context of the siege of cities in Bosnia. NATO has an encouraging bit of momentum up in Bosnia as a result of finally getting serious about Sarajevo and shooting down some provocative Bosnian Serb aircraft. You don't have to be a field marshal to understand how useful

it would be to keep would-be attackers guessing. A little discreet silence, a touch of ambiguity—that's what is required. Instead, Mr. Perry, earnestly plodding through a disquisition on the uses of military force, offers some of the gunmen of Bosnia a free pass.

The defense chief, taking a cue from the commander in chief, warns against making empty threats of military force—threats that the United States cannot enforce. This was certainly a prudent caution to utter at an earlier time when NATO's credibility was on the line. With NATO having now at least begun to earn its spurs in Bosnia, however, a caution against empty threats is transformed into a one-sided self-restricting denial of military opportunity.

Some Americans and others might raise a question or even an alarm if the administration seemed to be slipping into broader uses of force. But current circumstances put the United States in a position to have it both ways: to have sensible guidelines on the use of force but at the same time to strengthen its message that the disrupters of peace efforts in Bosnia should beware. Mr. Perry, precise and explicit where he should have let doubts linger, tells them not to worry.